No. 59

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"I want you to know the entire story," Betty whispered as she gently disengaged herself. "I must tell it in justice to myself, and so that you may be able to place the blame where it belongs."

R. of M. G., No. 59.

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JAMISON was listening to Betty as she told him of the impossibility of ever being reunited to her husband because of the vile insinuations he had heaped upon her. "A man couldn't love a woman," Betty continued, "whom he once believed guilty of selling herself body and soul to another man. You can understand, I hope, how useless it would be for you to interfere in the matter. I must leave him. I must go."

"Yes," Jamison agreed after a tense pause. "You have convinced me that it is the only thing to do now. I am not wronging you or wronging him by what I want you to do. Will you listen to my plan?"

"What plan?"

"You have absolutely decided to leave Wayne, to go out into the world to make a life for yourself?"

"I have—absolutely."

The millionaire paused as if reluctant to come forward with the proposition he had in mind.

He leaned a trifle forward and gazed eagerly at Betty.

"Do you believe that my feeling of love and friendship is unselfish, dear?" he inquired softly.

"Indeed I do. I haven't the least doubt about that," she returned, smiling.

"And do you believe that this unselfishness on my part will endure, Betty?"

"I don't doubt that, either."

"Well, that makes it easier for me to say what is on my mind. Now listen: I have a place on Long Island, my sister Ethel occupies it. I have made her a monthly allowance since her husband died a little over a year ago and left her practically penniless.

"This sister of mine is a good sort. She has been through bitter trouble and will understand. I want you

to go there and——"

"But why?" Betty questioned.

"Please hear me to the end," he urged. "You will go there and I shall join you. You, my sister and I will live together for the present. Wayne will no doubt consider that perfectly innocent arrangement sufficient ground for divorce. And he'll get one, if he is the type of a man I believe him to be.

"If you prefer, I'll stay on here in New York, and you and my sister can run out to Reno or some other place, and you can establish a residence there, and in a few months get a divorce yourself. I think that is far better than my Long Island plan."

"I don't need to get a divorce and I can't live on your charity," she demurred.

"But you need a divorce," he argued. "I want you to get one. And then — when you are free, and can bear to think of it, I want you to marry me."

"What?" the young wife seemed genuinely amazed.

"To marry me," Jamison repeated, unshaken by the abruptness of her query. "Don't say you won't. It is for both of our sakes. I am not under any allusion about you.

"You don't love me. Perhaps you can never learn to love me, but I can wait for your love, even if it is all my life.

"And in the meantime I shall have the right to shelter you, to protect you, to make you happy. I—I hope that this is not too much to ask of you. I am only asking you to take my name."

Betty drew back.

"You don't think for a moment that I would consent to such a mad plan?" she cried.

"Yes, I do — and you will," he persisted. "In your

frail state of health you could not think of going back on the stage to earn a living. If you had any such ideas, forget them."

"I am strong enough, I tell you. Besides, that matter is my affair."

"No, it is mine!" came back swiftly. "I am not going to eat out my heart in wretchedness, knowing you are in ill health and poor. I am not going to let you go back to the old life. I don't ask your love, and I'll promise not to annoy you with mine.

"All I ask is that you will take my name. And when the day comes that you can tolerate me as a lover, I'll be the happiest man who ever drew breath. Won't you give me the right to take care of you, dear?"

The young wife was still determined.

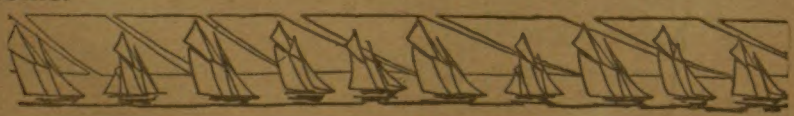
"I am not an object of charity," she declared.

"But I am," the millionaire returned. "And I beg you, through charity to me, not to wreck my future by refusing to do this. Oh, Betty, I'll make it up to you ten thousand fold for everything. I want happiness. I need it. I have gone without it for so long.

"Just to have the right to be near you is more than Heaven to me, my beautiful woman. You are the only one I have ever wanted.

"There have been hundreds of others who would gladly have sacrificed all to share my wealth with me. But I want you. Don't break my heart by saying you won't marry me."

When Jamison ceased talking there were tears in his eyes. He was waiting for an answer which would not come.



Chapter 198

THE YIELDING

NEVER HAD a woman been placed in such a position as Betty Wayne was at this particular moment. The intensity of the man's speech, his wild earnestness, the unselfishness of his love, the evident desire of self-sacrifice — all that moved her almost to tears. She wanted to make some sort of a reply, faltered and fell silent.

There was not the least shadow of doubt in her mind about his absolute sincerity in the matter. And the promise of ease, of safety and protection were fearfully alluring.

"I—I——" she began, then hesitated.

"Yes," he urged, trembling. "Yes?"

From the next room came a soft chuckling, followed by a cluck or two of wordless crooning.

The baby, awakened by the raised voices, was, according to her wont, peacefully talking herself to sleep again. It sounded like the cooing of an angel.

At the sound of the drowsy little voice, Betty sprang to her feet.

The momentary glamor was gone. Her senses were awaken to the real things of life. She took a few steps forward, then stopped.

With a little gesture wholly free from any hint of the dramatic, she pointed toward the room whence had come the sleepy crooning.

"Your answer, dear. Your answer!" Jamison pleaded.

"There is the answer," she said, her finger still

pointing.

"No," he cried fiercely. "It is not. In plays and cheap novels, just as the erring wife is about to flee with the tempter, the gold-haired child says something in a sweet voice that makes her repent.

"This isn't a play. This isn't a novel. This is real life, and you are not an erring wife.

"You are the purest, the best woman God ever made. And I am not tempting you. We are two free agents, clean of any guilt of act or thought. No man or woman, knowing the situation would blame either of us. And we are going to be happy together."

Betty shook her head, fighting to keep back the tears.

"The baby is——" she began.

"Baby is going with you," the man cut her short. "That is one reason why I want you to get a divorce instead of letting Wayne get it. And when you and I are married, I'll adopt her and she shall be the same to me as if she were my own child. I'll love her next to you."

"Another man's child?" the wife asked, incredulous and surprised.

"Your child, Betty. That is why I love her."

"Mr. Jamison!"

"I mean it, dearest, and you know I mean it. The baby shall have every advantage that money and love can give her. I will spare no expense. Betty, won't you listen to reason?"

She swayed toward him, her eyes dark with conflicting desires.

He took a step in her direction, but when he saw her draw back quickly, he paused.

Forcing his voice to calmness, he said:

"Before you give me your answer, I want you to think well. We are not children. I don't want to rush

you into anything you might regret I don't ever want you to look on this and wish you had not followed my advise.

"I love you. I am going to devote my whole life to you, if you'll let me. But whatever you do, I want you to do with your eyes wide open and your mind unbiased. And above all, think, dearest."

She had been thinking, and thinking hard.

Her resistance had been constantly weakened by his eloquent plea.

Her position was desperate. She knew it. And she knew also that she would never go back to her husband after what happened. This meant that she must work, and work hard to support her baby girl.

But what swerved her in favor of Mr. Jamison was not so much his wealth and sincere desire to lay it all at her feet.

She saw in him the best and noblest of men who offered everything and asked for nothing.

And in analyzing the situation, she admitted to herself that she did not love him—yet.

There was, however, an emotion tugging at her heart that was closest kin to love.

Up to this moment she had been the master of it, but now it began to dominate her.

Resuming her seat she gave him a long glance, then motioned him to sit beside her.

"Mr. Jamison," she began timidly, her eyes downcast, "I suppose most women in my predicament would jump at what you offer. I have not held out so long because of any affection I have for—for my husband. He killed that, and he could never recall it to life.

"There is something of which you know nothing, and that something is the reason why I could not marry you. Perhaps after I have told you, you'll change your

mind about wanting me for a wife."

"Nothing could change my mind," he broke in hastily. "Nothing, I tell you, Betty."

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Would you still think and feel the same if you knew that—that——" A sudden flush crept into her cheeks and she repeated: "Would you still think and feel the same if you knew that I had a past even before I married Harold Wayne?"

The millionaire stared at her, incredulous.

"You had a past?" he asked soberly. "Impossible."

"But there was!" she went on bravely.

There was no hesitation in his motion as he reached out for her and forced her to come close to him.

"You poor child," he said with such tenderness that it nearly swept away what self control she was striving hard to maintain. "That makes it all the more imperative that you should have someone to lean on now when you need a friend most. Your frank confession has not altered my mind in the least."

When his arm went about her she made but feeble resistance.

"I want you to know the entire story," Betty whispered as she gently disengaged herself. "I must tell it in justice to myself, and so that you may be able to place the blame where it belongs."

"Go on, dearest. I am listening," Jamison told her.

The former dancer related her story in all its revolting details. She made no attempt to shield herself.

Her voice, which had become nearly inaudible, grew stronger as she spoke of her coming to New York in search of a position on the stage.

"I married Wayne because I thought he was big enough and professed to love me enough to forget the

horrible mistake I made," she ended with a touch of infinite sadness. "But I realize now that I made a far worse mistake in becoming his wife.

"His unreasonable jealousy began to assert itself immediately after we were married.

"Every man who was nice to me he regarded with suspicion. Time and time again he accused me of carrying on vile intrigues behind his back. It sickened me. But when he accused me of selling myself to you for paying my hospital bill, my patience came to a sudden end.

"All the money and all the persuasion in the world could not make me take him back. He has lost faith in me, and I hate him. The terrible insults I have stood for from him I can never forgive or forget."

Here Betty buried her face in her hands and wept softly.

"You poor unhappy child," the millionaire said soothingly as he drew her to his bosom. "Please don't cry. It makes me miserable. Wayne was not worthy of you!"

She raised her head and her moist eyes searched his.

"Do you—you still want me to be your wife?" she breathed.

There was something so pathetic, so eloquent and moving in this question that the man impulsively drew her around to his knee.

Betty slipped from there to the floor suddenly and hid her face against him. Without a moment's hesitation, and somewhat roughly, he forced her chin upward and found that she was crying again.

"Ah, you poor, persecuted child," he murmured softly.

Her hands were now clasped about his knees, her wonderful auburn hair disheveled.

She was indeed the picture of a weeping, repentent Magdalene.

"Dry those tears now," Jamison said in a tone of cheerfulness. "And sit down here beside me."

She had some difficulty in regaining her feet.

As he attempted to assist her, she stumbled and fell into his arms. A cry of joy escaped his lips when she did not struggle to get away from him.

"Betty!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "Betty, I love you! Oh, I love you!"

There was no reply forthcoming, but she nestled closer to him and a deep sigh shook her slender frame.

She had yielded at last, wholly and completely.

"And you'll marry me?" he said softly.

For an answer she still clung to him, her arms growing tight about his neck.

He felt the swift beating of her heart, the warmth of her face, and a little fearfully he looked toward the door. It was as if someone had uttered a quick warning.

A faint noise coming from somewhere not far away set his taunt nerves acquiver.

Then suddenly there was a quick rattle at the door.

It was swung open and Harold Wayne stood upon the threshold, his face distorted and horribly white.

Betty, her back being turned to the door, had not seen her husband enter, but she released her arms and whirled around. She uttered a shrill scream and stood stricken as with paralysis at the frightful apparition.

Wayne strode into the room and slammed the door.

"I've got you now, damn you!" he snarled. "And I've got you dead to rights. I'll kill you both!"

As he whipped a revolver from his pocket Betty sprang forward and threw herself between Jamison and

her husband. But the finger was already pressing on the trigger.

There was a sharp report, a shriek, and she fell to the floor in a heap.

As she fell and rolled over, a bright red spot appeared over her left breast and increased in size. Both men stared at each other, then at the woman.

Stunned by what he had done, Wayne did not fire again.

Throwing the still smoking weapon in the corner of the room, he fell on his knees.

"Betty!" he cried, wringing his hands in an agony of remorse. "Betty, speak to me!"

But there was no response.

Again and again he called her.

Then he gathered her in his arms, kissed the bloodless lips, the white cheeks and the forever closed eyes. Then he began to sob.

Jamison stood paralyzed. He was struck dumb.

This had all happened so suddenly that he was unable to move for the moment or make a sound. He wanted to seize the madman by the throat and choke the life out of him.

He wanted to cry out aloud for help, but his tongue clove to the roof of his dry mouth.

There lay the one woman he had ever loved unselfishly, nobly and charitable, dying. He watched her slender body, fascinated, as it gave a slight quiver, then lay quite still.

He knew that the end had come, yet, would not admit it even to himself.

This horrible thing could not be possible—it was not true.

At last he was stirred into action by the heartbreaking sobs of the man who had so ruthlessly shot her

down. He sprang past him into the hall, where he had seen the telephone located.

Fortunately Dr. Hamilton happened to be in his office when Jamison called and begged him to come at once with all possible speed.

Then he went outside and paced the sidewalk, trembling with impatience.

When he saw a policeman turn the corner a short distance away, he motioned to him. And by the time the latter had reached him, Jamison had regained the mastery over himself. In fact he was quite calm.

"There is something to do for you inside, officer," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the front entrance. "A man just shot his wife."

The guardian of the law was about to leap up the stone steps when he was held back.

The hand that clutched his arm also held a crisp paper bill of no small denomination.

"Don't be hasty," the millionaire cautioned, forcing a smile. "I know these folk and I telephoned for a doctor a moment ago. Before you take any action let us first ascertain the extent of the woman's injury. The man who done the shooting won't make an attempt to escape. I'll vouch for that."

"Very well, sir," the officer pocketed the bill and saluted. "I'll keep close to the door if you want me."

Suiting the action to the words, he walked up the stone steps and took a position at the side of the front entrance.

There was nothing that suggested the least excitement about him. He was a police officer with many years of experience, and a murder in New York was a frequent occurrence.

Jamison had resumed his restless pacing up and down the sidewalk. Presently he saw a large touring

car swerve around the corner and approach at a terrific rate of speed.

It came to a stop in front of the building, and Dr. Hamilton jumped out.

"What's up, Maurice?" he asked anxiously, addressing Jamison.

"Come inside and see for yourself," the latter answered. "You, too, officer."

Upon entering the room their eyes met an unexpected scene.

Wayne was kneeling beside the quiet form on the floor, his right arm raised, his hand pressing the muzzle of the retrieved revolver to his temple.

Before either of them could interfere, a shot rang out and Harold Wayne sank to the floor.

"Good God, what is the meaning of all this?" Dr. Hamilton cried.

He hastened forward and quickly examined the two forms on the floor. It only took him a few minutes to realize that both of them were beyond human aid.

"The poor woman has been dead for several minutes," he announced, turning to Jamison. "And the man is breathing his last. I am afraid I am not needed here. This is a case for the police and the coroner."

He strode toward his friend with a question in his eyes.

"What went wrong here, Maurice?" he queried.

Jamison explained briefly, his voice quivering as he spoke.

"I tried to help them both and this is the result," he concluded huskily. "The fool killed a woman who was a thousand times too good for him."

"You better come away with me," the doctor advised seriously.

"Why?" the other inquired listlessly.

"This is a bad night's work and it may mean a little trouble for you," Dr. Hamilton responded, laying a hand on Jamison's arm. "I am sure you don't want your name to appear in the newspapers in connection with this affair, do you?"

"I don't care if it does," came back quickly. "I have nothing to hide."

"I know you haven't, old man," said the physician. "But you know what some newspaper reporters can do in the way of manufacturing stories in a case like this. They may show you in a very unfavorable light."

The millionaire nodded and turned away.

The police officer was standing near the door, waiting for further instructions.

"I suppose you know what to do," Dr. Hamilton remarked quietly. "This is a plain case of murder and suicide. Send the bodies to the morgue and I'll see the coroner in the morning and explain."

"Very well, sir."

The officer walked out, followed by the doctor. Jamison still lingered.

"Aren't you coming?" the physician cried, as he stopped and looked back.

"Not yet," was the hoarse response. "There is a baby in the next room I must look after."

"Let the officer take care of that," Dr. Hamilton advised. "I'll instruct him to send the baby to the Children's Home. To-morrow, if you feel it your duty to look after the child you can——"

"Alright," his friend agreed, nodding.

They left the apartment and were driven away. On Jamison's face was the listless expression of deep sorrow. He never spoke a word except bidding Dr. Hamilton a gruff "Good night" as they parted.

On the following morning the newspapers an-

nounced the double tragedy in small type.

They said that Harold Wayne had shot his wife and himself in a fit of despondency brought on by financial reverses. No other name was mentioned.

Wayne's mother, being the only living relative, took charge of the funeral arrangements. Jamison, being one of the chief mourners, insisted upon paying all the expenses.

Betty was laid to rest beside the man who had never understood her. And even in death her stony features expressed bitter disappointment.

Jamison asked permission to take care of the baby, which the grandmother refused to accede to.

"She is all I have in the world," the old woman wept. "And I could not give her up."

But the grim reaper had already decreed otherwise.

The baby became the victim of spinal menengitis and died two weeks later. She was buried at the side of her parents, and even the heavens wept as the little coffin was lowered into the ground.

A few days after that the newspapers announced that Mr. Jamison the wealthy New York clubman, had gone abroad.

Chapter 194

PARTNERS IN MISERY

THE TRAGEDY which cost two lives and was indirectly responsible for the death of an innocent baby, received plenty of space in the newspapers. The Gordons had just returned home. While abroad they heard of Betty Procter, the New York dancer, and they concluded at once that she was none other than the former Betty Harding, Alice's sister.

While the latter never made the least effort to locate Betty and get in touch with her, Philip Gordon conducted a quiet investigation, the results of which were not entirely satisfactory.

He, too, came to the conclusion that Betty was no longer the nice girl he had known once upon a time. But when he heard of her tragic death, he was shocked beyond words.

Seated in the dining room while breakfast was being served, the morning paper lay spread out before him. He waited impatiently until his wife came downstairs, then called her attention to the news.

"Read this and tell me what you think of it, Alice," he said, his voice somewhat strained and pointing to a lengthy column, headed:

"Former New York Dancer Shot by Jealous Husband, Who Commits Suicide."

For a brief space of time the room was deathly quiet.

Alice, while she read word for word, was breathing hard. But she held the paper sufficiently high to pre-

vent her husband from seeing her face.

And it was well that Phil did not see the expression of malicious triumph.

"Why, that is terrible!" she cried with mock horror as she returned the paper to her husband. "Poor Betty. Who would have thought that she would end that way."

It was easy for her to shed a few tears. In fact she appeared to be so upset that she could not eat any breakfast.

"Yes, it is a terrible thing," Gordon remarked slowly. "I surely never expected Betty to be murdered in cold blood by her own husband. I wonder if this Wayne could be the same fellow whom you have cause to remember," he added, watching Alice through the corners of his eyes. "Betty's husband's first name was Harold, according to the paper."

Alice flushed uncomfortably. She did not enjoy being reminded of the incident she was trying so hard to forget.

"What if it was?" she demanded, quickly forgetting her grief. "Harold had a right to marry whom he chose, didn't he?"

"So he did," agreed Phil, a little disappointed at the coldness in his wife's voice. "But wouldn't it be a frightful coincident if your own sister married the man whom you had for a lover?"

Alice shot him a venomous glance and rose from the table.

"If that is all you care to talk about, please excuse me," she snorted, and stalked from the room.

Gordon sat for a long time deeply in thought.

Again he picked up the newspaper and read the account of the double tragedy. He noticed with a degree of satisfaction that Betty's family connections had not

been mentioned.

He knew very well that this Harold Wayne was the same who had nearly murdered him that night when they met in the country road.

He thought of the woman, who, under the name of "Marie Desmond," had nursed him back to life. Her strange, compelling charm and fine character had won his love.

Ah, if he only was sure that she was his first wife. For there still remained a certain degree of doubt.

All efforts to locate her had been fruitless. But he vowed he would not give up the search. Since old John Procter's death his life had been nothing less than slow torture.

Fear of being made the target of criticism and ridicule by his so-called friends and enemies, he had been compelled to absent himself from Chicago for several months.

He hoped that by that time the sensational affair involving Betty and Mr. Fredericks would be forgotten.

The trip abroad had afforded him little pleasure because he did not have the right sort of a companion. At the outset his wife seemed desirous of forgetting the disagreeable past and start life anew.

But this resolve was of short duration. Like the leopard who can't change its spots, Alice soon fell back into the old habits.

She craved admiration. Phil saw not much to admire in her except a coldly beautiful face and a superb figure. Character she had none.

And with all her physical attributes, she fell short when compared with Marie Desmond, the former governess. The latter also had a character as beautiful as her matchless face.

While Gordon was mentally reviewing the past up

to the present hour, he found very little to feel elated about. Since his marriage to Alice his life had been scarcely worth living.

The only bright spot were his two lovely children. But even they brought him a bitter pang of remorse every time he looked into their faces.

They were so like the face of the woman he had loved with all his heart and soul—and lost.

And the various roads his milling thoughts took, always led back to this one woman—Marie Desmond.

So far as Betty and her sudden death was concerned, he decided to let matters rest as they were. If Alice wanted to have her sister's body disinterred and brought home for burial, he would offer no objection.

Gordon rose and stretched himself. On the way to his office the trend of his thoughts took a sudden turn.

It was caused by the sight of a man whom he had not seen for a long while. Seated in a taxi as it passed his car, was Victor Talbot. The latter's face was haggard and pale.

"Poor Victor Talbot," he murmured. "He has his troubles, too. And also on account of a woman."

The taxi in which Talbot was seated, was headed for Chicago.

It was traveling with great speed which seemed to indicate that he had urgent matter to attend to. Phil felt quite sure that Victor had not seen him.

An hour after Gordon arrived in his office, Talbot was announced.

"Hello, Vic!" he cried, taking the latter's outstretched hand and shaking it heartily. "Glad to see you. Sit down. I believe," he added as they both were seated, "that you passed me on the road. It looked as if you were going somewhere in a hurry."

Talbot thoroughly appreciated Gordon's cordial

greeting. It came as a relief when others showed an unmistakable inclination to turn their backs on him.

"You are right, Phil," he declared with a grateful smile. "I am going somewhere in a hurry. I am trying to find a trace of Lillian Crawford."

Phil nodded and his thoughts traveled into a different channel.

"By the way, old man," he cried, "let me congratulate you upon your acquittal. It was just what I expected. I followed up that murder case very closely. They could not convict you on such flimsy evidence."

An expression of pain crossed Talbot's face.

"Phil," he said a trifle huskily, "I almost wish they had convicted and hung me, too. Although the jury composed of twelve honest men and women said that I am not guilty, the world still points the finger of suspicion at me."

Gordon laughed.

"Ah, nonsense, Vic. You are too sensitive."

"Not at all," protested the other. "You don't know what I am up against. Nearly all of my old friends have forsaken me. My neighbors refuse to speak to me as we meet. Even some of my servants are leaving because they believe that I am guilty of having murdered Roger Hawkins."

"Well, here is one man who don't believe it," was Gordon's quick retort. "I don't know who shot Hawkins, but I do know that he got what was coming to him.

"I was very much surprised when I heard that Mrs. Crawford allowed him to stay at her house. That woman has no sense of delicacy. In fact I don't believe that she has any sense at all."

Victor Talbot remained silent. Although he had good reasons to feel bitter toward Mrs. Crawford, he re-

frained from condemning her.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Phil inquired suddenly.

"Yes," Victor answered with some emotion. "But you have already done it. My main reason for coming to your office this morning was to find out how you felt toward me since I was tried for murder. You shook my hand like the loyal friend you are. It has meant a great deal to me.

"The other reason is that I have some information which might interest you." He cleared his throat and went on: "While I was in prison awaiting trial, Lillian Crawford was spirited away by her stepmother.

"Quite by accident I learned where the girl was being kept in close confinement. I made a quick trip to Belvidere, a suburb of Tampa, Florida.

"To my intense disappointment I found Lillian had left the day I arrived. During her stay there, she had with her a companion whom I think you'll remember. She was Miss Marie Desmond——"

"Marie Desmond?" Phil leaned forward eagerly. "Are you sure about that, Victor?"

"Absolutely sure," the latter replied. "You know, I have often wondered why she left your home. From what I heard she must have been very much attached to your children."

"She was," admitted Gordon ruefully. "She loved them. Ah, I can't tell you how—how I miss her."

"You miss her?" Talbot repeated, glancing sharply at the speaker.

"Yes," came back hoarsely.

For a long moment the two men's eyes met and it was Philip Gordon who dropped his first.

"Victor," he said in a low, vibrating tone, "I have reasons to believe that this Marie Desmond is none other

than my first wife. Since she left Oak Manor, I have made every possible effort to find her and bring her back. I loved her as I can never love any other woman and because of——"

He paused to wipe a furtive tear from his cheek.

"I understand, old man," Talbot said sympathetically. "Your first wife was a splendid woman. I was shocked when I heard that she left you. You seemed so devoted to one another."

"So we were," responded Phil. "I made the greatest mistake of my life when I allowed jealousy to rule me. I thought her guilty of doing a dishonorable thing. But I found out the truth when it was too late. I made another great mistake when I married my present wife.

"No couple was ever less congenial. Alice is——" He could go no further, for a powerful wave of emotion choked him.

"You need not tell me about your unhappy life with your second wife," said the other. "Alice Procter had no right to marry any man. No woman who is so utterly and so coldly selfish as she is, can make a husband happy. I—I hope you will pardon me for saying that, Phil," he added apologetically.

The latter nodded his head and smiled pathetically at Victor.

"No, Victor, you need not apologite," he remarked quietly, "for you have spoken the truth. I have been a blind fool. But," he added with a sudden flash in his eyes, "if I find this Marie Desmond and am convinced that she is my first wife, I'll give the scandal mongers something worth while to talk about. If Alice won't agree to a divorce, I'll leave her.

"I'll take Marie to some distant island and live with her in a hut if I have to. Nothing in all the world shall ever come between us. Good God, man!" he cried.

"You don't know how I loved that woman. I again fell in love with her while she was employed at my house as governess.

"It is not a pleasant thing to admit, Victor," he continued, again calm and apparently composed. "A married man like I was, has no right to think of another woman living under his own roof. The way my two little children idolized her should have aroused my suspicion, but——"

At this juncture the telephone began to ring. Gordon reached for the receiver and put it to his ear.

The speaker at the other end happened to be an old business associate with a serious problem on his mind.

Victor Talbot waited patiently until the conversation ended.

As Gordon replaced the receiver he turned to his visitor with an apologetic smile. Again the telephone rang, and again the call was answered promptly.

Another business proposition was being discussed while Talbot waited.

Finally he drew out his watch. He had only twenty minutes now to get the train he expected to take for the South. Reaching for his hat, he rose, ready to leave.

"You'll pardon me, old man," he said to Phil, who was listening intently to words coming over the wire. "I'll have to go."

"Wait a moment, please," begged Gordon. Then into the transmitter he bellowed: "Call me again in fifteen minutes. Not before."

Rising quickly, he took Talbot's arm and together they walked toward the door.

"I want you to do me one favor, Victor," Phil begged. "I am very anxious to find out where this Marie Desmond is keeping herself. The chances are you'll run

across her. No doubt she is still in the employ of the Crawfords, and if that is the case, let me hear from you at once."

Talbot nodded his assent.

"Within the next twenty-four hours I hope to have the information you want," he declared. "I shall not return home until I have found Lillian Crawford. And if Miss Desmond is still with her, I'll wire you at once."

Their hands met in a strong grip, and a moment later Victor was on his way.

Gordon resumed the seat at his desk and stared into space for quite a while. Somehow he felt confident that he would hear some good news regarding the woman his soul longed for.

A tender smile illuminated his features and clung there even when the harsh ring of the telephone once more claimed his attention.

Chapter 195

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

IN THIS CHAPTER we must take the reader back to Belvidere, the beautiful suburb of Tampa, Florida, in order to relate why Lillian Crawford so suddenly left the cozy cottage by the sea. It was late in the afternoon, and the young girl and her companion were, as usual, seated on the veranda.

They had been discussing the probable fate of Victor Talbot. Marie Desmond seemed to feel confident that he would be acquitted, but Lillian failed to share this feeling.

"All the evidence is against him," she sobbed. "They even found his gun lying close to the scene of the murder."

"You must not give up hope, my dear," the older woman encouraged. "Now let us go in and have dinner. I think it is ready. Later we'll take a nice stroll along the beach."

Lillian happened to go to the window before she took her seat at the table. She was just in time to see a taxi coming to a stop in front of the cottage.

The chauffeur had left his seat and hurried to open the door and assist a handsomely gowned woman from the vehicle.

Suddenly a low cry escaped her lips.

"Look—look!" she gasped, beckoning to her companion. "That is my stepmother."

One single glance sufficed to inform Marie Desmond that the unexpected visitor was indeed Mrs. Crawford.

A moment later the latter came bustling into the room.

"Hello, both of you," she cried amiably. "Surprised to see me, aren't you? Well, I got good and tired sitting alone at home, so I suddenly made up my mind to come and see how my girl is."

With these words she approached Lillian and with seeming tenderness attempted to embrace her.

The young girl recoiled.

"Please, don't touch me, mother," Lillian objected.

"No?" Mrs. Crawford seemed annoyed. "Still sore at me, are you? And I can't blame you, my dear child. But it is not very nice of you, when I came all the way to bring you some good news."

Lillian swiftly exchanged glances with her companion.

Mrs. Crawford quickly stepped over and greeted Marie with great warmth.

"You are looking well, Miss Desmond," she exclaimed, her keen eyes surveying her step-daughter's companion. "Don't you think Lillian does wrong by receiving me so coldly?"

Marie did not feel called upon to make a reply. And had she made one, it would in all probability not have been pleasing to Mrs. Crawford.

"Don't you want to hear the wonderful news I brought with me?" the latter said, again turning to Lillian with a smile.

"Of—of course I do, mother," the girl answered, a dash of color coming into her cheeks. "What is it?"

"Victor Talbot has been acquitted."

"Acquitted?" The young girl repeated the word in a gasp.

"Yes. They set him free for the want of conclusive evidence. And the jury was out only a short while.

Not more than thirty minutes, I believe. This is good news, isn't it?" Mrs. Crawford added with another smile.

The shock of joy was almost too much for Lillian. She began to totter and reached for the arm of a chair to support herself.

Then, entirely overcome, she sank down, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob. Her stepmother was beside her instantly.

"Now, my dear child, you must not give way like that," she crooned. "I know you are very happy."

For the moment the young girl forgot the nasty treatment she had received at the hands of her stepmother.

All her bitterness vanished, and, with an impulsive motion she seized her hand and kissed it.

"Yes, I am very, very happy," she confessed, tears of joy streaming down her soft cheeks. "Please, tell me all about it, mother. Were you at the trial? How did Victor stand it? At first it was said that he would be convicted. How did he take the verdict? Did he seem glad?"

Mrs. Crawford laughed.

"One question at a time, my dear," she said, stroking the young girl's hand gently. "And you must allow me to take off my things first. I see dinner is ready. After we have eaten, you shall know all."

Marie Desmond went into the kitchen and gave some hurried instructions to the servant.

Another cover was laid, and in a few minutes they were seated about the table, chatting in the most agreeable fashion.

Mrs. Crawford refused to divulge the object of her coming, though Lillian plied her with questions.

Her attitude was that of extreme kindness. Not

a single harsh word did she utter even when her impatient stepdaughter became insistent.

She talked at length with Miss Desmond and appeared to be much concerned about the physical welfare of Lillian.

The dinner seemed like an eternity to the girl. She was so happy and so expectant that she could eat but little.

Once seated in the cozy sitting room, Mrs. Crawford began to unburden herself. She toyed for a moment with the locket which hung suspended on a solid gold chain about her neck, then addressed her stepdaughter:

"Well, Lillian, I am frank to confess that I made a serious mistake. The last few weeks have wrought a complete change in me. Little by little I came to see the error of my ways.

"Now I fully realize that it is no longer in my power to keep you and Victor Talbot apart. Fate seems to have decreed that you two should belong to each other."

She paused for a few seconds to let the words sink in, then continued, her keen eyes resting on the overjoyed young girl:

"I had quite a chat with Victor during the trial. The poor boy suffered terribly. He was not worried about himself. He did not seem to care what became of him so long as you, dear child, did not lose faith in him. That is all he would talk about.

"Right then and there my mind was made up to withdraw all objections to your marriage. After his acquittal I had an opportunity to talk to him again. I told him that he had my permission to marry you. I don't believe I ever saw a happier man in all my life.

"He would have hugged me had we been alone. I wish you could have seen him, Lillian. He was just like

a boy who had received a wonderful toy for Christmas."

"Is—is that true, mother?" the young girl gasped, still somewhat incredulous.

"Of course, it is," came back quickly.

Marie sat regarding Mrs. Crawford with a well defined feeling of suspicion.

"I can well believe that you are surprised, my child. You certainly could not have been prepared for this," continued Mrs. Crawford in a vivacious manner. "But I had to do it to satisfy my own heart and conscience, and I am glad I decided the right way.

"Well, after I had spoken with him, I took the train at once and came to bring you the good news as quickly as possible. I will take you home with me, Lillian. Victor has gone to Cincinnati to recuperate, and we will meet him there together."

Utterly confused, Lillian still continued to gaze at her speechlessly. She seemed to be unable to grasp the possibility of the happiness which Mrs. Crawford held before her.

Suddenly she asked:

"But why did not Victor come with you?"

"That could hardly be, my child," was the quick retort. "As I have told you, he has gone to Cincinnati to recuperate, as his health was injured in prison. He looks bad, poor fellow, but it is not to be wondered at after all he has gone through. In happiness and freedom he will soon be himself again."

Mrs. Crawford paused. Then she demanded in a hurt tone:

"Well, Lillian, why do you look so dazed? Are you not anxious to see your lover soon again?"

Was she glad? A bright light dispelled the veil of tears which clouded her eyes. Greatly touched, she took her step-mother's hand, and said:

"Forgive me for having hurt you so often. From now on it will be different."

Mrs. Crawford's eyes blazed in triumph. She saw that Lillian was convinced. With characteristic vivacity, she turned to Marie who had all this time been a mute listener.

"I owe you many thanks, Miss Desmond," she said. "You have fully justified my confidence in you. I am sorry that your employment is so suddenly ended, but I feel certain that you feel glad at Lillian's happiness.

"I will see that you do not suffer any loss. You will receive six month's pay, and you may count upon my recommendation if you require it."

It was only with an effort that Marie could restrain a sarcastic smile. If this woman only knew what wealth was at her command and why she had taken this position!

She answered with a few polite words and kept rather in the background, as Mrs. Crawford now spoke to Lillian about the journey before them.

In the features of the young girl, an expression of boundless happiness alternated with one of doubt.

Her gaze hardly ever quitted the countenance of her step-mother, as though she wished to make certain that she was the same woman who, a short time ago, had stood against her in bitter enmity and pitilessly worked to destroy her life's happiness.

And yet, how gladly we believe what we hope and pray for!

The young girl's heart was filled with bliss at the thought that Victor was free and that she would see him in a few days.

Mrs. Crawford set the journey for the following morning and requested Marie to arrange accordingly. She seemed desirious of having Marie out of the way, but

kept Lillian at her side. It was palpably her wish not to leave them alone together.

For a while she busied Lillian and herself with looking over the young girl's wardrobe, and remarked that she was in need of an entirely new outfit.

Then she proposed various plans of travel in company with Talbot and Lillian after they joined him at Cincinnati.

In the evening, however, when Mrs. Crawford who was tired from her journey, had retired, Lillian slipped into Marie's room, finding her busily engaged in preparation for leaving on the morrow.

"Oh, how happy I am, so wonderfully happy!" she cried, embracing her friend in stormy affection. "Victor free! I am to see him again, and we will part no more.

"But why are you so grave?" she went on, a sudden cloud wrinkling her brow. "Don't you rejoice with me? Oh God, I feel again a doubt which I cannot shake off! Yes, I see it in your eyes, too, that this is all deception; cruel, false play. Oh God! I could not live through it——"

The words came from her lips like a cry. In mortal anxiety she clung to Marie Desmond who took her in her arms and sought to quiet her.

"No, no, Marie, say nothing, I know you think otherwise," faltered the poor girl. "I could not make up my mind whether she was sincere. How could she change so suddenly? She has never loved or cared for me and now, all at once, all this affection and sympathy!"

"Be calm, Lillian," Marie answered, "let us speak quietly together. Why should I deny it, dear? From the first I have been unable to believe in her sincerity. I have been thinking and I have a plan for you to follow, which I think will help you."

Continued in next number

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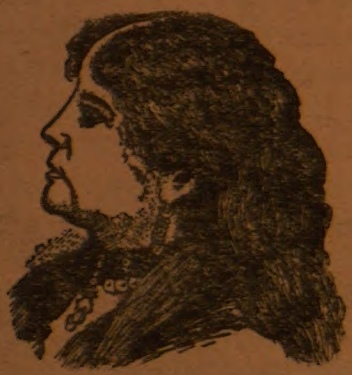

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